



State Route 80

Benson to Douglas Highway and Douglas to Rodeo Highway

Location: Safford District; Cochise County
Length: 122 miles
Begins: Benson, south of Interstate 10 (MP 293.27)
Ends: West of Rodeo, at the Arizona–New Mexico State Line (MP 415.39)

Modern State Route 80 (SR 80) spans 120 miles from the New Mexico border near Rodeo to Interstate 10 at Benson. Along its path, SR 80 passes through the historic communities of Douglas, Bisbee, Tombstone, and St. David. Today SR 80 is but a remnant of the 2,568-mile U.S. highway (US 80) that stretched from Savannah, Georgia to San Diego, California, forming an important element of the U.S. national defense system after World War I.

Unlike some historic highways in Arizona, SR 80 does not follow the path of an ancient Indian trail. Rather, it owes its existence to the discoveries of silver in Tombstone and copper in Bisbee. Prospectors found these precious metals in the same year—1877—and trails were created, connecting mines with mills and miners with supplies. After the Southern Pacific Railroad reached Tucson, Benson, Willcox, and Lordsburg in 1880, mule-drawn freight wagons carrying mill-stamped ore deepened the trails between Bisbee and Benson, establishing the basic route for the future state highway. Stagecoaches also traveled along these informal roads, connecting these rich mining towns with the rest of the nation. Although Tombstone's silver played out by 1886, Bisbee, "Queen of the Copper Mines," persisted. By at least 1900, critical portions of what would be SR 80 between Bisbee and Douglas were improved, not by the Arizona Territorial government but rather by the mining companies. The companies wanted to ensure that heavy loads of crushed copper ore would get to new smelters in the recently planned community of Douglas. By the time automobiles became regular features on the landscape of southeastern Arizona, between 1905 and 1910, concerns for better roads became paramount.

In 1909, the Territorial Legislature created the position of Territorial Engineer to develop well engineered roads that would facilitate commerce, local travel, and tourism. That year, plans were drawn up to transform existing wagon roads, county roads, and trails into a major north-south highway (Douglas to Flagstaff), complementing an existing east-west highway (Yuma to Solomonsville). By 1909—

three years before Arizona would become a State—plans for improving the road between Douglas, Bisbee, and Tombstone were firmly in place.

The earliest roadwork took place in 1910, involving the 21-mile stretch between Bisbee and Douglas. Cochise County—the richest county in Arizona Territory—spent \$90,769 (equivalent to \$1.99 million today) to treat the existing gravel road with an asphalt mix, stabilizing the surface and reducing dust. Six years later, the State of Arizona realigned, graded, and drained the 25.9-mile section north of Bisbee for \$260,185 (equivalent to \$4.90 million today), using prison labor to reduce costs. The remaining segments between Douglas and the New Mexico state line and between Tombstone and Benson were graded or graveled for the first time between 1920 and 1922. In 1926, SR 80 was renamed US 80 to acknowledge its importance as a transcontinental highway. As funds became available through a variety of government programs, US 80 was completely paved with either asphalt mixtures or concrete by 1935. In the late 1930s, laborers funded by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) repaired worn sections of highway, rebuilt bridges, replaced culverts, and improved drainage. Since that time, both prison and paid laborers have maintained the old road, all the while improving its durability and functionality as road-building technology advanced.

In 1989, US 80 lost its U.S. highway status, and remaining sections not covered by Interstate 10 or other state roads once again became a state road. Despite its numerous face-lifts and name changes, SR 80 persists as an essential state road that still retains aspects of its early beginnings when it was part of the intercontinental highway nicknamed the "Broadway of America."